



Daisy L. Gatson Bates



Daisy L. Gatson Bates (far r) and her husband, L.C. Bates, celebrate Thanksgiving at their home with the “Little Rock Nine,” from left (Carlotta Walls, Terrence Roberts, Melba Pattillo, and Thelma Mothershed. November 1957. Photo courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission.

Introduction

Any time it takes eleven thousand five hundred soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can't be happy.

Daisy Bates

In September 1957, Daisy L. Gatson Bates, Arkansas State President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and co-owner, with her husband, L.C., of the *Arkansas State Press* newspaper, was thrust into the spotlight during the Little Rock school desegregation crisis. Throughout the crisis, Bates served as a spokesperson for the NAACP’s efforts and also as a mentor to the “Little Rock Nine,” the nine African-American students who first attended the formerly all-white Central High School.

Early Years

Daisy Lee Gatson Bates was born in the south Arkansas sawmill community of Huttig (Union County), on November 11, 1914. As a child, she learned that her biological parents had been victims of racial violence. Her mother was murdered while resisting the advances of three local white men. Her father left shortly thereafter and Daisy was reared by friends of her father – the only family she ever knew. Although the tragedy of her mother’s death and the racial discrimination she experienced early in her life caused Bates to dislike whites, her adopted father disapproved of her prejudice and, moments before his death, said the words that

inspired her to work for civil rights. Her father’s words contained a timeless lesson: “**Hate can destroy you...If you hate, make it count for something. Hate the humiliations we are living under in the South. Hate the discrimination that eats away at the soul of every black man and woman. Hate the insults hurled at us...and then try to do something about it...**”

Bates said of her father’s message, “He had passed on to me a priceless heritage—one that was to sustain me throughout the years to come...I decided I would do what I could to help my race.”

Arkansas State Press

In 1941 she married Lucius Christopher Bates, an insurance salesman and former journalist, and together they moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, and founded the *Arkansas State Press* newspaper. At one time it was the largest statewide African-American-owned paper. The *Arkansas State Press* focused on the need for social and economic improvements for the African-American residents of the state, and became known for its fearless reporting of acts of

police brutality against African-American soldiers from a nearby military base.

As a public and highly vocal supporter of the programs of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Mrs. Bates was selected in 1952 to serve as the president of the state conference of the organization’s Arkansas branches.



NAACP’s Reaction to *Brown*

When the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public education unconstitutional in 1954, Bates led the NAACP’s protest against the Little Rock School Board’s plan for gradual integration of the public schools and pressed instead for immediate desegregation. NAACP officials, accompanied by newspaper photographers, recorded each instance when African-American children were refused admission to white public schools.

The Little Rock School Board announced its plan to begin desegregation at Central High School in September 1957. Daisy Bates and the nine black students who enrolled at the high school—the “Little Rock Nine”—withstood white segregationist intimidation. At first, the students were not allowed to enter the school. Finally, on September 25, the day after President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard, the students were escorted safely into the school.

Little Rock Crisis

Daisy Bates continued to be an advocate for the students throughout their time at the school. Even though they were under federal troop protection, the Little Rock Nine endured harassment at the hands of some of their fellow students. Bates kept some records of the incidents of harassment and was even called upon to help out during a couple of severe episodes.

In early October, Jefferson Thomas, one of the Little Rock Nine, was struck behind the ear at school. Bates received a telephone call about the incident and was told that Thomas had been

knocked unconscious. She called for help to take him to the doctor and then to her home. She later wrote in her memoirs, “**When I saw the size of the lump on the side of Jeff’s head, I completely lost my temper. During my tirade against the school authorities for permitting this kind of cold-blooded cruelty to continue, I paused in front of Jeff, who sat huddled in a big chair. To my surprise, he was smiling. This calmed me down somewhat.**” Ultimately, Bates contacted General Edwin Walker, who was in charge of the troops at Central, to complain about the abuse and the Army subsequently assigned individual guards to each student.

Aftermath of the Crisis

Throughout the period of the crisis, the Bates’s home was under attack for their courageous stand in support of equal rights. The Bates’s newspaper, the *Arkansas State Press*, folded in 1959 because of advertising boycotts led by segregationists. They both, however, continued working for civil rights. L.C. Bates became the NAACP field director for the state until he retired in 1971. Daisy Bates worked for the Democratic National Committee and for Lyndon Johnson’s antipoverty programs.



Daisy and L.C. Bates examine a cross that was left in their front yard with detectives from the Little Rock Police Department, 1956. Photo courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission.

Daisy Bates House National Historic Landmark

“This home stands as a symbol for those who fought to preserve the civil and constitutional rights of every American...In the days and years ahead, people from all over the country will come to this simple but significant place to learn about a very noteworthy time in American and Arkansas History.”

William Jefferson Clinton

In 1968, Bates moved to Mitchellville (Desha County), Arkansas and retired in 1974. L.C. Bates died in 1980, and Daisy Bates revived the *Arkansas State Press* in April 1984. She sold the paper in December 1987, but remained a consultant. She was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, and after her death in 1999, the State of Arkansas declared a state holiday in her honor. There was a

time in 1957, at the height of the Little Rock crisis, when Daisy Bates could not drive up 14th Street to Central High School without fearing for her life. Today, that street is named in her honor. It is called Daisy L. Gatson Bates Drive. In 2002, the home where Bates and her husband lived for thirty-two years, at 1207 West 28th Street in Little Rock, was designated a National Historic Landmark.

Former President William Jefferson Clinton speaks at a fundraiser for the Daisy Bates House National Historic Landmark. Seated are, from l to r: Rev. Don Gibson, Pres. of the L.C. and Daisy Bates Museum Foundation, Dr. Johanna Miller Lewis, Chair, Department of History at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and The Honorable Jim Dailey, Mayor of Little Rock. April 2002. Photo courtesy of the UALR Public History Program.

